

Intensifiers in New Zealand English¹

Gina Scandrett
University of Canterbury

Abstract

This paper examines changes in intensifiers in New Zealand English, using the Origins of New Zealand English (ONZE) corpus. Results indicate that the use of 'very' has decreased over time, while 'really' has become more common. 'So', 'pretty' and 'real' have also increased, but the use of these incoming intensifiers appears to be gendered. The results from the New Zealand English data are compared to work on other varieties of English.

1. Introduction

The analysis of New Zealand English (NZE) has contributed much to the field of sociolinguistics, but attention has largely been focussed on the phonetics and phonology of the variety, at the expense of grammatical and discourse features (with several notable exceptions e.g. Bauer 1989, 1993, Quinn 2000, Hundt, Hay & Gordon 2004 and references therein). This paper presents the results of an apparent time study of intensifiers, such as 'very', 'really' and 'so', in the speech of New Zealanders born from 1851, using data from the Origins of New Zealand English Corpus (ONZE).

Although patterns of intensification are well studied in many varieties of English (discussed briefly below), we know relatively little about this aspect of NZE. In 2002, Bauer and Bauer completed a study of lexical variation in the language of New Zealand children aged 11-12, who were asked to provide the words they used for certain concepts via a questionnaire. This was a useful methodology for this particular task but, as Bauer and Bauer (2002: 244) note, its utility in examining intensifier use is somewhat limited because, for example, the words are taken rather out of context. The conclusions about intensifiers drawn from Bauer and Bauer's work, then, are necessarily tentative, but they do suggest that intensifier use is changing in NZE. In particular, they indicate that 'so' and 'really' are increasing in New Zealand and that 'very' is in decline. However, since the participants in Bauer

¹ I gratefully acknowledge the prior work of the Origins of New Zealand English Project (ONZE) in preparing and transcribing the data and gathering background information about the speakers. For more information about ONZE, see <http://www.nzilbb.canterbury.ac.nz/onze.shtml>. I also wish to thank Edinburgh University Press and Cambridge University Press for permission to reproduce Figure 1 and Figure 2, respectively.

and Bauer's study were all young children, it was not possible to examine change in progress (for example, in apparent time). Hay, Maclagan and Gordon (2008) develop this line of enquiry by analysing interviews in the ONZE corpus (the Intermediate Archive [IA], which has recordings of people born between 1890 and 1930, and the Canterbury Corpus [CC], which has recordings of people born between 1930 and 1984). Hay et al's (2008) results are presented in Figure 1, showing that the intensifier 'very' is indeed decreasing over time and 'really' and 'real' are increasing. This supports Bauer and Bauer's (2002) observations that intensifier use is changing in New Zealand. The present study contributes to this discussion by examining the development of intensifiers in New Zealand in ONZE's Mobile Unit (MU), which contains speakers born between 1851 and 1910, as well as in the IA and CC datasets. Thus, this paper increases the age range of speakers studied to those born between 1851 and 1984.

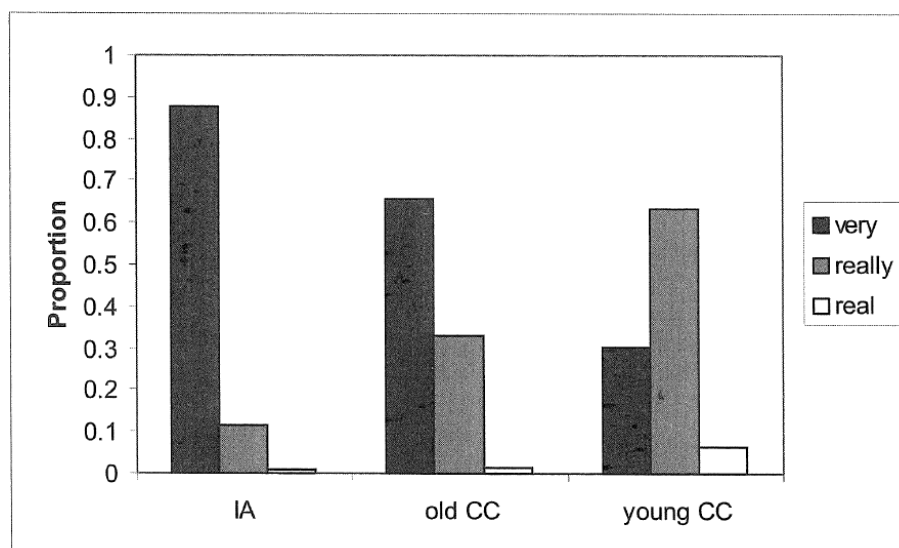


Figure 1: Intensifier frequency in New Zealand speakers from the Intermediate and Canterbury Corpora (from Hay et al. 2008: 64. Reproduced with permission.)

The study of intensification in the English language is well established, with work reaching back into Old English. Research undertaken as early as the beginning of the 1900s (Stoffel 1901, Borst 1902, each cited in Barnfield and Buchstaller 2010) has shown that intensifiers consistently evolve and change over time, as illustrated in Figure 2, where we see 'very' being introduced in the 16th century and 'really' appearing in the 18th century.

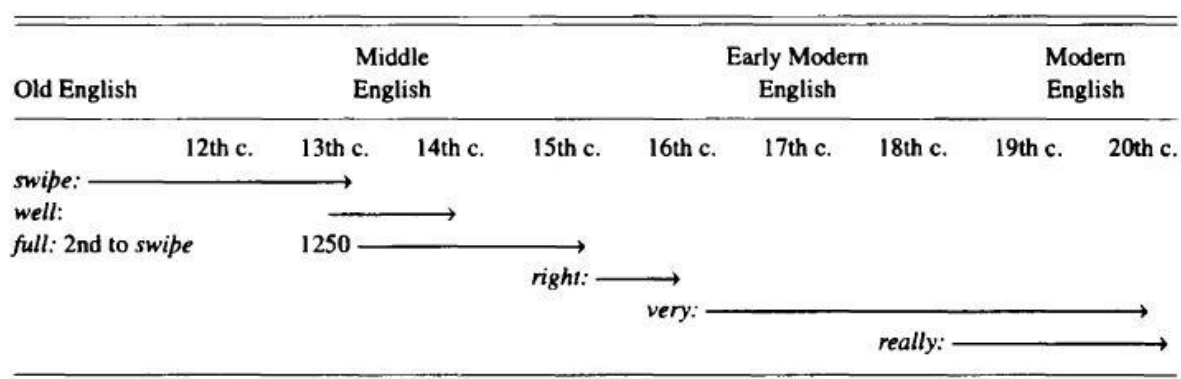


Figure 2: Historical overview of longitudinal change for various intensifiers (from Ito and Tagliamonte 2003: 260. Reproduced with permission.)

Studies have also explored more recent change in intensification in English speaking societies, including North America (Tagliamonte & Roberts 2005), Canada (Tagliamonte 2008) and England (Barnfield & Buchstaller 2010). These studies find change in intensifier use even over a relatively short period of time, and while there are differences across localities, there are also many similarities in how the intensification system develops – a point to which I return below. Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005) studied the use of intensifiers in the television comedy show *Friends* and found that the intensifier used most often was ‘so’, followed by ‘really’, which had both replaced ‘very’. In Canada, Tagliamonte (2008) showed that ‘very’ had also been replaced by ‘really’, but that ‘so’ had not (at the time of the investigation) increased. Barnfield and Buchstaller (2010), studying intensifiers in Tyneside English, spoken in the north-east of England, yet again found that ‘very’ was decreasing and that ‘really’ and ‘so’ were both increasing, but also that ‘dead’ as an intensifier was on the rise (e.g. ‘I was very happy’ ~ ‘I was dead happy’). Based on this work, I hypothesise that ‘very’ will show a reduction in use in apparent time in NZE. Given the variation in the intensifiers that replace ‘very’ in other varieties of English, it is difficult to predict exactly what the incoming variant(s) in NZE will be, although the likely candidates noted in previous work on NZE are ‘so’, ‘really’ and ‘real’ (Bauer and Bauer 2002; Hay et al 2008).

2. Methodology

One of the initial problems in studying sociolinguistic change in intensifiers is defining the variable context. Syntactically, intensifiers fall under the heading of degree modifiers and have been categorised by previous research into three general types: reinforcers, moderators, and diminishers (Barnfield and Buchstaller 2010; Biber et al 1999; Bolinger 1972; Quirk et al. 1985; Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005). These terms refer to the role the intensifiers play in relation to the head of the phrase being modified – reinforcers maximise the meaning (*really* good), moderators add no

extra emphasis in either direction (*just* good), and diminishers reduce the effect of the head (*somewhat* good). I focus here on reinforcers. The head that is modified can be of many types (e.g. adjective, noun, verb), but most studies of intensification focus on adjectival heads, so that is the approach that I take in this paper, for the sake of comparability. Labov's (1972) *Principle of Accountability* argues that when we define the variable context, we should look not only at where the feature of interest occurs, but also at where it could occur but does not. In this case, adhering to this principle would mean analysing every adjective which could be intensified, whether it was actually intensified or not. However, since I am interested in the intensifiers themselves and not in whether there has been a change in the amount of intensification over time, I do not take this approach. Instead, I consider only the adjective heads which have a preceding intensifier, and leave an approach which adheres to the principle of accountability to future work.

2.1 Speaker sample

The data for this study come from the ONZE database at the University of Canterbury, which includes speakers born between 1851 and 1984. The analysis looks at a total of 105 speakers (53 female). These speakers are divided into groups according to birth year, with 14 decades split as 1851-1859, 1860-1869 and so on. The tokens were drawn from casual conversation in interviews. An attempt was also made to ensure the group of speakers was as socially homogeneous as possible, but caution is necessary because certain demographic information is missing for some speakers in ONZE, particularly those of the Mobile Unit. 'Occupation type' is recorded for speakers in the most recent Canterbury Corpus (as 'professional' or 'non-professional'), and for this paper only 'non-professional' speakers were selected. Occupational information is not available for the Mobile Unit and Intermediate Archive corpora. Information about a speaker's ethnicity is also not included in this database, so this variable has not been taken into account. Table 1 shows the distribution of participants examined in this paper.

Table 1: The distribution of participants in this study

Birth year	Number of speakers	
	Female	Male
1851-1859	2	0
1860-1869	4	4
1870-1879	4	4
1880-1889	3	4
1890-1899	4	4
1900-1909	4	4
1910-1919	4	4
1920-1929	4	4
1930-1939	4	4
1940-1949	4	4
1950-1959	4	4
1960-1969	4	4
1970-1979	4	4
1980-1984	4	4
Subtotals	53	52
Total	105	

2.2 Data Extraction and Analysis

The first step was to search for tokens of intensifiers from each speaker, using the syntax layer of ONZE², on which words are automatically labelled with a part-of-speech tag from the CELEX database.³ The search string *ADV + A*, across two words, identified strings of adverb (*ADV*) plus adjective (*A*). This produced 41,216 hits. However, the majority of these were not cases of reinforced intensified adjectives, and so the list was manually sorted and edited to select the valid items, which resulted in 1,909 tokens of intensifiers. Following a preliminary analysis to understand the general pattern of intensifier behaviour, it transpired that not all intensifier tokens were returned in the initial results list, perhaps because of the

² ONZE now runs on the LaBB-CAT client. See <http://onzeminer.sourceforge.net/>.

³ The CELEX database contains lexical entries with codes for phonological and morphological segmentation and for parts of speech. See R.H. Baayen, R. Piepenbrock and L. Gulikers (1996) CELEX2. Linguistic Data Consortium, Philadelphia.
<http://www ldc.upenn.edu/Catalog/catalogEntry.jsp?catalogId=LDC96L14>

mechanism by which ONZE labels words with a part-of-speech tag. Therefore, a second search was carried out for the specific lexical items ‘pretty’, ‘real’, ‘really’, ‘so’, and ‘very’, when followed by an adjective. These were the intensifiers which had the highest number of hits in the first search, and this second pass was used as a validation technique to ensure each token was extracted for all selected speakers. In what follows I briefly present the results of the first search technique (syntactic pattern matching) before focussing on the data gathered using the lexical item matching method.

3. Results

The intensifiers which were returned from the search of adverb plus adjective on ONZE’s syntax layer are shown in Table 2. The four most frequent tokens were ‘very’ (75%), ‘pretty’ (16%), ‘real’ (4%) and ‘great’ (3%). The remaining 2% consist of 11 other intensifiers which were only very infrequently used, according to this search method.

Table 2: Intensifier frequency for search string “ADV” followed by “A”

Intensifier	N	%
Absolute	1	0%
Awful	1	0%
Blessed	1	0%
Bloody	14	1%
Damn/Damned	4	0%
Dead	13	1%
Extra	1	0%
Fucking/Fuckin'	1	0%
Great	51	3%
Mighty	1	0%
Pretty	296	16%
Real	80	4%
Really	4	0%
Terrible	1	0%
Very	1440	75%
Total	1909	100%

Previous work has typically defined a cut-off point of the number of tokens required for a particular intensifier to be included in an analysis. Barnfield and Buchstaller (2010) have a cut-off point at a rounded 3% of the total number of tokens, and have the following list of intensifiers: in an older corpus of Tyneside English, in which the youngest speakers are born in 1958, the most common intensifiers are ‘very’ [65%], ‘real(ly)’ [8.6%], ‘rather’ [6.4%], ‘absolute(ly)’ [2.9%], and ‘so’ [2.9%]. In a more recent corpus of the same variety of English, in which the youngest speakers are born in 1977, the most frequent intensifiers are: ‘dead’ [35.9%], ‘really’ [25.1%], ‘very’ [18%], ‘so’ [7.5%], and ‘absolutely’ [4.1%]. Other work uses a cut-off of 10 items. Tagliamonte and Roberts (2005) follow this approach and show that in a corpus of 1886 intensifiers from the television show *Friends* the most frequent are ‘so’ [occurring 832 times], ‘really’ [464 times], ‘very’ [269 times], ‘pretty’ [115 times], and ‘totally’ [53 times]. Any cut-off point is rather arbitrary, but it is worthwhile to compare the NZE data with the other literature. Using a cut-off of 3% with the NZE data includes the four most frequent intensifiers highlighted above: ‘very’ (75%, 1440 tokens), ‘pretty’ (16%, 296 tokens), ‘real’ (4%, 80 tokens) and ‘great’ (3%, 51 tokens). Using a cut-off of 10 tokens adds ‘bloody’ (14 tokens) and ‘dead’ (13 tokens) to this list. The low rate of ‘really’ and complete absence of ‘so’ in this dataset was unexpected, given that we know from previous work that these words have increased in other varieties of English (Barnfield and Buchstaller 2010; Ito and Tagliamonte 2003; Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005; Tagliamonte 2008) and the recent claims about NZE (e.g. Hay et al. 2008). To examine this further, a second search was carried out for any adjective preceded by the specific lexical items ‘pretty’, ‘real’ and ‘very’, the top three intensifiers from the previous search, and also ‘really’ and ‘so’. The results were then manually checked to ensure each token was a reinforcing intensifier. The new counts for these five words are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Intensifier frequency for ‘pretty’, ‘real’, ‘really’, ‘so’ and ‘very’ followed by “A”

Intensifier	N	%
Pretty	190	8%
Real	70	3%
Really	260	11%
So	314	14%
Very	1461	64%
Total	2295	100%

These results show that ‘so’ and ‘really’ are attested in relatively high proportion in NZE overall, even more so than ‘pretty’ and ‘real’. This indicates that the general search string “ADV” plus “A” was insufficient on its own to extract all data from ONZE. To examine change over time, the results from this second search were stratified by age. The distribution for female speakers is shown in Figure 3, and the distribution for male speakers is shown in Figure 4.

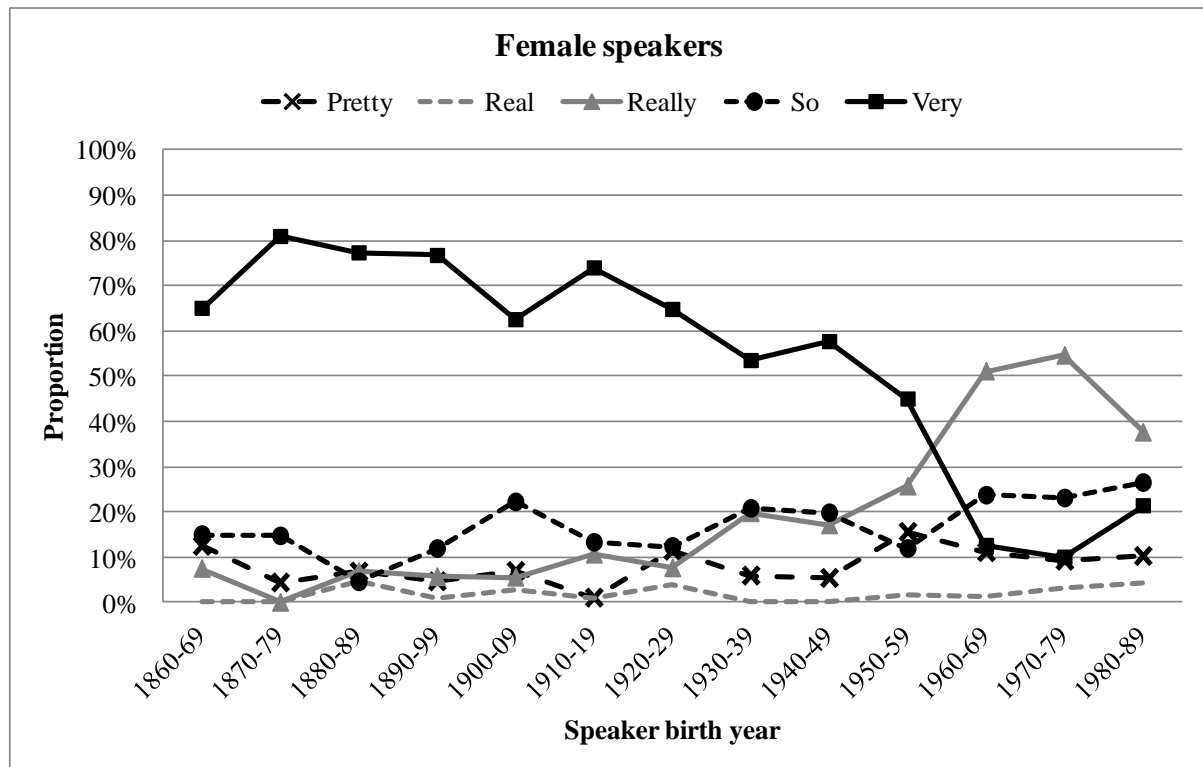


Figure 3: Female distribution of specific intensifiers by birth year (in decades)

These results show clear relationships between some of the intensifiers in apparent time. For both female and male speakers, ‘very’ is decreasing in frequency over time. For female speakers, ‘very’ was the majority variant until the cohort born in the 1950s. Prior to this, the closest competitor to ‘very’ was ‘so’, although ‘really’ begins its rise in the cohort born in the 1930s. In the cohorts born in the 1950s and later, the use of ‘really’ increases rapidly, such that it becomes the majority variant. For the male speakers, too, ‘very’ was the majority variant until cohort born in the 1950s, but for the men it is ‘pretty’, not ‘so’, which was the closest competitor. Indeed, for the male cohorts born in the 1950s and 1960s, ‘pretty’ was the majority variant, a pattern we never see for female speakers. The difference in the use of ‘pretty’ by male and female speakers over time was confirmed with a chi-square test (X^2 (2 s.f.)=46.04, $df=13$, $p<.001$). For male cohorts born in the 1970s and later, ‘really’ becomes the majority variant, a decade later than for the females, suggesting female speakers are in the lead with this particular change. A chi-square test also suggests that ‘real’ is used more by males than females (X^2 (2 s.f.)=23.21, $df=10$, $p<.01$), but this is likely due

to two decades only (1950-1959 and 1980-1989), so I would not wish to place too much weight on this observation.

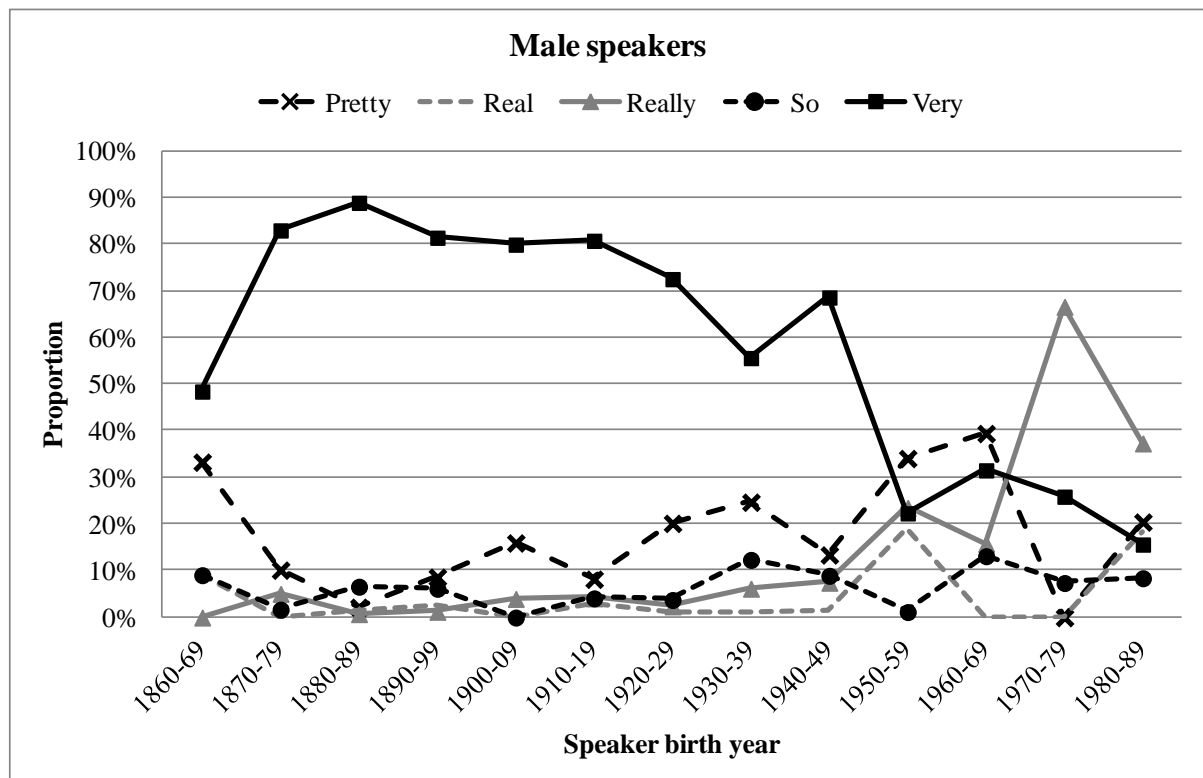


Figure 4: Male distribution of specific intensifiers by birth year (in decades)

4. Discussion

The evidence suggests that there is change over time in New Zealand English intensifiers. The intensifier ‘very’ is becoming less frequent, having been replaced by ‘really’, although other intensifiers have also increased slightly (e.g. ‘so’ for the female speakers, and ‘pretty’ for male speakers). I am thus able to confirm observations made in previous work. Bauer and Bauer (2002) suggested that ‘so’ and ‘really’ are increasing in NZE and that ‘very’ is declining, which is supported by the analysis presented here, particularly for female speakers in the case of ‘so’. Hay et al (2008) suggested that ‘real’ as an intensifier is increasing in NZE, and this is also tentatively supported, but only for male speakers.

As mentioned above, similar patterns in the use of intensifiers have been found elsewhere. In Canada, Tagliamonte (2008) showed that ‘very’ was the most frequent intensifier in speakers over 50 years of age, but that it declined rapidly in those speakers who are 30 or younger. This is compatible with the picture for NZE observed here. Tagliamonte (2008: 384-385) also shows that ‘so’ is used more often by females, and ‘pretty’ is used more often by males. That this difference is also

attested in the NZE data is an interesting finding, and lends support to Tagliamonte's (2008) argument that the intensifier system operates in a cyclic evolution, in which while the rate of change and the precise time point at which intensifiers begin to change may differ across localities, we can actually observe a rather similar pattern across even very distant dialects of English (see also Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005).

If this is true, then we might expect to see 'so' continuing to increase in frequency, perhaps eventually taking over 'really' to become the majority form for both male and female speakers. Indeed, since the youngest speakers in the ONZE corpus were born in the mid-1980s, and given the rapid change observed in this paper even over a relatively short time frame, this may already have started to happen, but only future work will be able to reveal whether it is in fact the case.

References

- Barnfield, K. & Buchstaller, I. 2010. Intensifiers on Tyneside. Longitudinal developments and new trends. *English World-Wide*, 31.3, 252-287.
- Bauer, Laurie 1989. The verb 'to have' in New Zealand English. *English World-Wide* 10: 69-83.
- Bauer, Laurie 1993. Progress with a corpus of New Zealand English and some early results. In Clive Souter & Eric Atwell (eds), *Corpus-Based Computational Linguistics*. Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1-10.
- Bauer, L. and Bauer, W. 2002. Adjective boosters in the English of young New Zealanders. *Journal of English Linguistics*, 30, 244-257.
- Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S. and Finegan, E. 1999. *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. Harlow, Eng.: Longman.
- Bolinger, D. 1972. *Degree Words*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Borst, Eugene 1902. *Die Gradadverbien im Englischen*. Heidelberg: Winter.
- Hay, J., MacLagan, M. and Gordon, E. 2008. *New Zealand English*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd.
- Hundt, Marianne, Jen Hay & Elizabeth Gordon 2004. New Zealand English: morphosyntax. In Kortmann et al (eds), 560-592.
- Ito, R. and Tagliamonte, S. 2003. Well Weird, Right Dodgy, Very Strange, Really Cool: Layering and Recycling in English Intensifiers. *Language in Society*, 32, 257-279.
- Labov, W. 1972. *Sociolinguistic patterns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Quinn, Heidi 2000. Variation in NZE syntax and morphology. In Allan Bell and Koenraad Kuiper (eds), *New Zealand English*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 173-197.
- Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G. and Svartvik, J. 1985. *A comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. New York: Longman
- Stoffel, Cornelis. 1901. *Intensives and Dow-toners: A Study in English Adverbs*. Heidelberg: Winter.
- Tagliamonte, S. and Roberts, C. 2005. So Weird; So Cool; So Innovative: The Use of Intensifiers in the Television Series 'Friends'. *American Speech*, 80.3, 280-300.
- Tagliamonte, S. 2008. So different and pretty cool! Recycling intensifiers in Toronto, Canada. *English Language and Linguistics*, 12.2, 361-394.